

SALTON SEA HABITAT WORKING GROUP MEETING

**August 9, 2005
Ontario, CA**

Introductions

Attendees were welcomed by Dale Hoffman-Floerke (DWR). Attendees introduced themselves and stated their affiliations.

Process Presentation

David Christophel (CH2M HILL) presented information on the process that DWR was following to develop the Ecosystem Restoration Study and Program EIR and discussed the role of the Habitat Working Group.

Agenda

David reviewed the meeting agenda, which included the following topics.

- Restoration Goals and Objectives
- Existing Habitat Conditions
- Science Panel Update
- Avian Habitat Modeling
- Restoration Approach
- Discussion of Preliminary Alternatives

Goals Discussion

David facilitated a discussion of the draft habitat goals and objectives for the restoration plan. The group devoted considerable discussion to the overall goal: "To retain and maximize the diversity and abundance of fish and wildlife species that use the Salton Sea and related habitats through a combination of habitat preservation, enhancement, and creation."

One working group member suggested that the goal was too habitat-oriented and should include greater focus on species. However, most of the discussion revolved around the use of the term "maximize" to describe the fish and wildlife goals and whether this goal was consistent with the intent of the legislation. Some members of the group suggested that the overall goal should include the verbatim language contained in the legislation, specifically with regard to "historic levels and diversity of fish and wildlife." The group discussed the difficulty in managing habitat to achieve a specific point in time in the past, particularly given the dynamic character of the Salton Sea. One member explained that the use of the term 'historic' in the legislation was intended to define the level of restoration, not to recreate a point in time, and that "historic levels" were intended to define the floor, rather than a ceiling, for the level of restoration. All agreed that the overall goal should continue to be refined.

David asked the group to review the goals and objectives and submit any additional comments electronically. Dale offered to have an e-mail reflector set up for the Habitat Working Group so that all participants could automatically receive comments or suggestions on the goals as they are submitted.

The group also discussed the specific objectives that addressed promoting habitat diversity, enhancing the quality of existing habitats, making full use of available water, incorporating flexibility in design, and developing a monitoring and adaptive management plan. As part of this discussion, it was suggested that monitoring needed to precede adaptive management and that there was a need to fund monitoring for the long-term. It was also suggested, with general agreement from the group, that the restoration plan should include the establishment of a fully funded, science-based entity to oversee the monitoring and adaptive management elements of the plan.

Further discussion addressed specific edits to the goals that will be incorporated into the next draft.

Current Habitat Conditions

David presented information regarding the quantity of the various habitat types currently present in the study area. This discussion was accompanied by a table of habitat acreages and maps. He explained that the estimates were preliminary and based on information from various sources. He also emphasized that habitat quality was a key consideration.

One member felt that 6 inches to 36 inches was the important depth range for wading and shorebirds, and suggested adding another shallow water classification that was less than 3 feet deep. Another member pointed out that the New River and Alamo River deltas are artificially constructed and dredged to keep them open.

Several members questioned what would be included in human health risks for the estuarine, freshwater marsh, and saline shallow water goals. The response was selenium accumulation in fish tissue and waterfowl tissue that could be consumed by humans.

During the discussion of managed freshwater habitat goals, Doug Barnum (USGS) pointed out that increasing habitat does not always result in larger populations as some bird species are not limited by the amount of habitats at the Salton Sea.

David concluded the discussion current habitats and introduced Kim Nicole (DFG) who provided information on other ongoing and planned habitat restoration activities near the Salton Sea (Appendix 6). The projects include the following:

- Imperial Irrigation District/San Diego County Water Authority Water Transfer
- Coachella Valley M S HCP
- Coachella Canal Lining
- All American Canal Lining.

In total, these projects would provide 736 acres of marsh habitat and 439.5 acres of tree habitat.

Science Panel Update

Doug Barnum provided an update on the Salton Sea Science Panel and discussed the following points.

- Three meetings have been held thus far.
- The next meeting will be held on August 22, 2005 in Sacramento.
- The panel has discussed inflow, nutrients, contaminants, and habitat as they relate to the various configurations under review.
- The panel will be providing input to a selenium mass balance model.
- The panel has discussed the importance of long-term monitoring as a key element of the restoration plan

PRBO-Bird Habitat Modeling

Diana Stralberg (Point Reyes Bird Observatory) presented information on the Salton Sea Habitat Conversion Model. Diana explained the habitat conversion model and indicated that it is similar to the model they used to examine the effects of habitat conversion at San Francisco Bay. It is designed to predict bird use of habitats within the Salton Sea and adjacent areas under differing restoration scenarios. It uses statistical models based on the 1999 bird abundance and distribution data. She also explained the limitations of the model. Diana expected to have very preliminary results by the end of August.

General Restoration Approach

David provided several slides on the approach to restoration and pointed out the opportunities for habitat preservation, enhancement, and creation. He described how the inflows to the Salton Sea could be used to support a stable marine water body and create freshwater marsh and saline shallow water habitat. He also indicated that important habitat decisions would be with respect to the relative proportion of each of those habitats to create or maintain and their location. A portion of the inflow also would be used to reduce the potential for air quality problems.

Alternative Habitat Configurations

Darryl Hayes (CH2M HILL) provided information on how the various habitats could be configured under the various alternatives.

After much discussion, members of the group suggested that it would be beneficial to review specific habitat configurations. In response, Dale indicated to the group that for the next meeting the project team would develop specific configurations for each of the major alternatives, including the amounts of each type of habitat and where each habitat type will be situated.

Adjournment

Dale adjourned the meeting at 3:35 after scheduling the next meeting for September 8, 2005 in Ontario.

ATTENDANCE

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Handouts

- Draft habitat goals and objectives

- Table of current habitat acreage
- Maps of current habitats